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‘The Limits and Potential of Syndicalist Influence in the Durham Coalfield before the Great War’

Lewis Mates

Abstract

For the first two decades of the twentieth century, syndicalism (revolutionary trade unionism) was the most vigorous of the left’s challenges to the capitalist order in many parts of the world. In Britain, syndicalism was reckoned to have had most impact in the South Wales coalfield but there have been no detailed studies of its influence in other British coalfields. This article explores the various ways in which syndicalism’s influence can be gauged in the Durham coalfield, comparing it with the South Wales experience. While the two coalfields had a good deal in common, a number of considerations, most importantly relating to the agency of syndicalists on the one hand and Independent Labour Party (ILP) activists on the other, militated against syndicalism’s relative influence in Durham.

Introduction

Syndicalism, though a much contested term, is essentially revolutionary trade unionism.[1] It became the foremost revolutionary strategy across vast areas of the

* Thanks are due to Emmet O’Connor, Kevin Davies, David Howell, Ken John, Don Watson, Chris Williams, John Patten and to Ralph Darlington, Dave Douglass, Peter Mates, Rob Stradling, Marcel van der Linden and the anonymous referees for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

[1] This article employs the term syndicalism as equivalent to the ‘revolutionary syndicalism’ defined by Marcel van der Linden; syndicalism in its ‘broadest sense’; ‘all revolutionary, direct-actionist’ (p.182) organisations and including self-styled ‘syndicalists’, ‘industrial unionists’,

globe in the thirty years after the mid-1890s, with the emergence of the syndicalist *Confédération Générale du Travail* (Confederation of Labour, CGT) in France.[2] Along with the CGT, of particular influence on the development of syndicalism in much of the English-speaking world was the American Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or 'Wobblies'). Marxist Daniel de Leon and his Socialist Labour Party (SLP) were significant in the IWW's founding in 1905. De Leon's two-pronged strategy endorsed 'dual unionism' in the industrial arena; creating 'industrial unions' to work alongside and eventually replace existing 'reformist' trade unions. In the conventional political arena, activists should stand for election on a revolutionary ticket. While de Leon's strategy became enshrined in the IWW's founding preamble, its opponents eventually emerged victorious in 1908 with an amended preamble that explicitly ruled out any IWW involvement in the political process. This schism over political action reverberated throughout the syndicalist world. Meanwhile, developments in Ireland, with James Connolly and Jim Larkin's Irish Transport Workers' Federation (ITWF) founded in 1908, were also of particular significance to mainland Britain. Though not a revolutionary union, the ITWF contained syndicalist elements and Larkin hoped that it would become the organisational centre of a future industrial union. The bitter Dublin lockout of the ITWF in 1913 stimulated considerable solidarity in Britain.

'industrial syndicalists' and the multiplicity of other terms they used. However, this is not to gloss over the significant ideological differences that did exist and that played an important part in syndicalists' outlooks and relations in the global movement. van der Linden, 'Second thoughts', 182–3.

[2] See van der Walt and Schmidt, *Black Flame*, especially 149–168;. Darlington, *Syndicalism* and van der Linden and Thorpe, *Revolutionary Syndicalism.*

With these international influences, three separate syndicalist strands developed in Britain. Positions on the two crucial issues of dual unionism and 'political action' (i.e. standing for elections) differed and changed over time. The longest-standing strand was represented by the 'industrial unionist' SLP, established in 1903 under the influence of Connolly and de Leon. In 1909 it rejected its initial 'bore from within' stance, establishing the dual unionist Industrial Workers of Great Britain. In 1910, Tom Mann established the Industrial Syndicalist Education League (ISEL), which also dropped its initial 'bore from within' strategy for dual unionism three years later.[3] The SLP, meanwhile, criticised Mann's relative newcomers for eschewing 'political action', as well as inconsistency and obfuscation. A third distinct syndicalist strand –that has still to be fully and sympathetically explored in the British context– developed along essentially anarchist lines.[4] (The term 'anarcho-syndicalist' was not ordinarily employed at that time). Grouped around the paper *Herald of Revolt*, it began as dual unionist. A grouping rejecting dual unionism emerged with the *Voice of Labour* paper, launched in early 1914.[5] For the anarchists, Mann's rejection of political action was not firm enough.

Activists initially linked to the ISEL, and operating as the 'Unofficial Reform Committee of the South Wales Miners' Federation' achieved the greatest pre-war syndicalist successes (albeit relative) in Britain. These were embodied by *The Miners' Next Step*, a propaganda pamphlet published in January 1912. It was the product of the lessons taught by the bitter Cambrian Combine dispute in

[3] Davies, 'Syndicalism and Industrial Unionism', 23; Holton, *British Syndicalism*, 38, 114–6; Challinor, *British Bolshevism*, 95–6.

[4] Quail, *Slow Burning Fuse*, 255.

[5] Holton, *British Syndicalism*, 121, 142–3; White, 'Syndicalism', 109–110.

the South Wales coalfield, the result of a cut in miners' hours instituted by the Eight Hour Act that exacerbated already declining coalfield productivity. The South Wales miners struck over conditions and wages, particularly piece rates for face workers in 'abnormal places' where the coal seams were difficult to work. At its peak 30,000 were involved and the dispute occasioned the infamous Tonypandy riots of November 1910.[6] Though defeated, the strike spawned a movement in the coalfield for a national minimum wage and, in summer 1911, South Wales sent 'missionaries' to other coalfields to agitate for national action on the issue.

The Miners' Next Step was widely distributed in the weeks before the national miners' strike over the minimum wage, which its predominately syndicalist authors and their supporters had done so much to bring about. Thanks to this one strike, 1912 marked the peak of days lost to industrial action over the whole period of British labour unrest between 1910 and August 1914. Aiming for the 'elimination of the employer', *The Miners' Next Step* was a revolutionary document.[7] But it was also pragmatic, suggesting various means the workforce could employ to make the mines unprofitable short of all-out strikes (including winning the minimum wage). By this stratagem –it argued– the miners could take over the industry, not via some form of central state nationalisation but by direct workers' control. Crucially, *The Miners' Next Step* was clear that radically reforming existing institutions would bring about the unions workers needed, rather than dual unionism.[8] Many of the document's authors, like Marxist Noah Ablett, were educated at Ruskin College, Oxford, and actively encouraged and

[6] See Smith, 'Tonypandy', 158–184 and Mór-O'Brien, 'Tonypandy riots', 67–99.

[7] *The Miners' Next Step*, 30.

[8] Ibid., passim; White, 'Syndicalism', 112.

then supported its more revolutionary off-shoot, the Central Labour College, established in London in 1910.

But to what extent were the South Wales miner syndicalists exceptional? Eric Hobsbawm claimed that syndicalism's influence in Britain 'was almost certainly much smaller than enthusiastic historians of the left have sometimes supposed'.[9] Many others have pointed to British syndicalism's apparent relative insignificance when compared with much of continental Europe and the wider world.[10] Explanations for this relate to the strong ideological grip of Fabianism on the left and wider British labour movement, the popular appeal of Parliamentarism, the broader and deeper spread of traditional, more conservative trade unionism and the apparently conservative nature of the British working-class, tendencies bolstered by the strength of the moderate 'labour aristocracy' within it.[11] Bob Holton, by contrast, claimed that syndicalism's achievements in many continental contexts have been exaggerated, and that the 'limitations of the overseas syndicalist record suggest little justification for demoting the British movement to "inferior" status on comparative grounds'.[12] Holton also emphasised what he deemed 'proto-syndicalism'. For example, that rioters targeted certain shops and individuals at Tonypandy in November 1910 suggested that a 'proto-syndicalist' mood of industrial insurgency had developed

[9] Hobsbawm, *Workers*, 273.

[10] Hobsbawm, *Workers*, 273.

[11] The classic Marxist explanation for the apparent conservatism of the British working-class was expounded by Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn. See, for examples, Anderson, 'Origins' and Nairn, 'English Working Class'.

[12] Holton, *British Syndicalism*, 22–3.

among the South Wales miners, as strikers clashed directly with state power.[13] Holton's 'proto-syndicalism' has come under fairly sustained criticism, and remains a rather vague term that militates against appreciation of more nuanced or ambiguous evidence.[14] Nevertheless, Holton was right to criticise 'national stereotyping' in relation to understandings of syndicalism, pointing out that Britain passed through periods of moderation and militancy with syndicalism coinciding with an important example of the latter.[15] Indeed, the most recent research suggests clearly that the British example was inspirational specifically for French syndicalists, and also -on ideological and strategic levels- influential further afield.[16]

That said, considerable uncertainty still remains firstly over quite how much influence syndicalists in Britain exercised in many industrial contexts, not least in many important British mining regions. And secondly, why was the relatively well-studied South Wales experience apparently not emulated elsewhere in Britain? In addressing these two questions it seems logical to begin by researching other coalfields. In this context, the grounds for examining developments in the Durham coalfield, in north-east England, are strong. The Durham Miners' Association (DMA) was comparable to the SWMF (South Wales Miners' Federation) in size and influence, within the national Miners' Federation (MFGB) and the wider labour movement. In 1912, the DMA, with 121,805 members, was the second largest union district to the SWMF (with

[13] Ibid., 78–84.

[14] Davies, 'Syndicalism and Industrial Unionism', 6; Hinton, review of Holton, 10–11; Darlington, *Syndicalism*, 156.

[15] Holton, 'Revolutionary syndicalism', 267.

[16] Bantman, 'Internationalism', 961–981; Darlington, 'British Syndicalism', 103-140.

135,553 members) and held considerably more funds that its larger co-affiliate.[17] Both coalfields provided for the export market and were consequently particularly susceptible to the vicissitudes of coal prices on world markets. Both unions had had leaderships that regarded miners and coal owners as having a common interest in promoting the industry's well-being through conciliation and arbitration. Yet, the essential Lib.-Labism of the older guard of both unions' leaderships, embodied by SWMF president William Abraham and DMA general secretary Dr. John Wilson (both also Liberal MPs), was being increasingly undermined. This process in general terms was already underway by 1910, as the MFGB had voted to affiliate to the Labour Party two years earlier. Miners' officials such as William Brace and Thomas Richards (SWMF vice-president and secretary respectively) and Alderman House in Durham had moved, or were moving, from Lib.-Labism to fuller support for the Labour Party. Yet Wilson's continuing advocacy of conciliation coupled with the leadership's high-handedness towards their members angered a growing and increasingly vocal section of the rank-and-file.[18]

Discontent erupted in early 1910. The DMA leaders agreed, without a lodge vote, to a worsening of miners' working conditions in the form of a Three Shift (and in some cases Four Shift) System, which the coal owners deemed necessary to maintain profitability after the Eight Hours Act came into force. The Three Shift System maintained coal hewers' relatively short working hours but the

[17] *Durham Chronicle*, 15 March 1912.

[18] For the purposes of this article 'rank-and-file' can include elected lodge officials. The term becomes more complex with the election of 'rank-and-file movement' activists to the DMA's Executive Committee; technically they were then part of the leadership, though no important rank-and-file activists, lodge official or not, was elected a fulltime DMA official until 1915.

changing shift patterns brought considerable disruption to family and social life to the three quarters of Durham miners who were not already working such a shift pattern.[19] Equally poor union leadership over the minimum wage issue in 1912 saw increasingly high levels of unofficial strikes in the coalfield. Unofficial strikes, not supported by the central DMA, were very risky and testify to the strength of lodge feeling. This, in addition to a process of democratisation at lodge level in this period, suggested new possibilities for the militants. While the Independent Labour Party (ILP) had made significant inroads into the previously Liberal-dominated Durham coalfield, the conditions after 1910 appeared to offer further opportunities for more radical approaches to gain purchase.[20]

Therefore, circumstances obtaining in the Durham coalfield held considerable *potential* for syndicalists. The approach adopted in this article resonates with Ralph Darlington's recent work in seeking to better assess syndicalism's influence, or potential influence, by emphasising the clear and important distinction between overt syndicalist activists and the broader currents of which they formed a (sometimes significant) part. Crucial too is the acceptance that, while syndicalists were not always present at times of industrial militancy, certain conditions *could* generate a wider sympathy for their ideas.[21] Indeed, Bob Holton has claimed that miners' syndicalism had its next most important impact after South Wales in the Durham coalfield.[22] On the other hand, Roy Church and Quentin Outram concluded that syndicalist influence was virtually

[19] Douglass, 'Durham Pitman', 266–267 McCormick and Williams, 'Eight-Hour day', 222–238.

[20] Howell, *British workers,* 45–51.

[21] Darlington, *Syndicalism*, 155–157.

[22] Holton, *British Syndicalism*, 169.

nil in County Durham.[23] Neither authority, however, provided a detailed account of this influence (or lack of) and its limiting factors in the Durham coalfield. This article fills this vacuum. The first part discusses the evidence for syndicalist influence, albeit giving full attention to the problems associated with measuring it at grassroots level. The second part considers the various factors that informed and conditioned this influence, many of which may well have applied to some extent in other British industrial contexts. In doing so, it deploys the considerable body of existing research on South Wales syndicalism as a yardstick for gauging the relative success of the Durham syndicalist movement.

Assessing Syndicalist influence in the Durham Coalfield

While commentators differ over the extent to which syndicalism was able to realise the latent potential in the Durham coalfield, they all base assessments largely on the roles of two important Durham activists (both of whom began their political lives in the ILP). The first of these was George Harvey, from near the market town of Chester-le-Street, who joined the SLP while at Ruskin College in 1908 (aged 23). On returning to the coalfield, Harvey became editor of the national SLP journal, *The Socialist*, 1911–1912 and produced two controversial propaganda pamphlets. The second of these launched a vitriolic attack on DMA leader John Wilson, who successfully sued Harvey for libel in November 1912.[24] The court proceedings, in which Harvey attacked Wilson directly over his methods, provided tremendous press publicity, helping Harvey

[23] Church and Outram, *Strikes*, 62, 68. Craig Marshall drew a similar conclusion in an earlier Masters thesis. Marshall, 'Industrial Militancy', 240.

[24] Challinor, 'Jack Parks', 34–38 (for Harvey's early life see 34–37); Challinor, *British Bolshevism*, 116; Douglass, 'Durham Pitman', 286–287; Holton, *British Syndicalism*, 113–143. See also Walker, 'Harvey article' and 'Harvey thesis'.

to launch a 'Durham Mining Industrial Union Group' at a meeting of about twenty representatives.[25]

The second activist was Will Lawther of Chopwell, a pit village in the north-west of the Durham coalfield. Lawther converted to syndicalism while attending Central Labour College for a year from October 1911.[26] He was agitating in the Durham coalfield on a syndicalist platform from May 1912, moving towards anarchist syndicalism by early 1913.[27] Lawther's grouping, that could send dozens to an anarchist conference in Newcastle by April 1914, propagandised energetically and coordinated with other anarchists regionally and nationally.[28] Lawther's most obvious achievement in this period was the 'Communist' (or 'Anarchist') club in Chopwell, funded by his wealthy contact George Davison.[29]

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[25] The meeting agreed to issue Durham lodges with a copy of its manifesto, but no existing lodge minutes record receiving it. *Evening Chronicle*, 7 November 1912; *Durham Chronicle*, 15 November 1912.

[26] Smith and Saville both mistakenly claimed that Lawther was two years in Central Labour College. Craik and Atkins, however, were correct. *Newcastle Journal*, 16 March 1955; Craik, *Central Labour College*116; Atkins, *Crumbs nor Condescension*, 62, 65, 67; Smith, 'Sir William Lawther', 29. See also Clarke, 'Interview', 14–19.

[27] *Durham Chronicle*, 31 May 1912; *Blaydon Courier*, 1 June 1912; 19 October 1912; Quail, *Slow Burning Fuse*, 278–279.

[28] Bob Holton claimed that Lawther moved towards anarcho-syndicalism, but Lawther did not employ this term specifically (see above reference). *Freedom,* July 1913; September 1913; May 1914; *Evening Chronicle*, 13 April 1914; Avrich, *Modern School Movement*, 263; Holton, *British Syndicalism*, 113, 142, 169. For more on anarchism in the Durham coalfield see; Pattison, 'Anarchist Influence', and Quail, *Slow Burning Fuse,* 250–4

[29] *Newcastle Journal*, 16 March 1955; Harding, 'George Davison', 387–388; Quail, *Slow Burning Fuse*, 254; Atkins, *Crumbs nor Condescension*, 63.

While the intensity of Harvey's and Lawther's activities suggested that their ideas exercised a reasonable degree of influence, can this be better measured across the Durham coalfield? Here Lawther's role was vital; he was one of the main organisers of an 'Industrial Unionist conference' held in Chopwell under the auspices of the 'Durham Miners' Unofficial Reform Committee' in October 1912. (The Welsh influence was clear). Lawther and Harvey addressed the conference; eight lodges were represented, and a ninth, Chilton, sent an official letter of regret at non-attendance expressing sympathy with its objectives.[30]

Ostensibly, evidence of the lodges attending this conference tends to endorse Bob Holton's rather cursory discussion of syndicalism's wider influence in the Durham coalfield. Holton attached significance to lodge voting patterns over the return to work after the national miners' strike in April 1912, though the only DMA lodge vote he specifically considered was Chopwell's. Here Holton linked a 1,315 to 76 vote against returning to work (95%) with Lawther's syndicalist influence and the village's later development as one of several so-called inter-war 'Little Moscows'.[31] Indeed, six of the eight lodges attending the Chopwell 'Industrial Unionist conference' voted strongly against returning to work.[32]

Other evidence, however, reveals a far more complex relationship between this particular vote, attendance at the 'Industrial Unionist conference' and syndicalist influence at lodge level. In fact, the most compelling evidence suggesting a contrary interpretation to Holton's involves Chopwell lodge itself, one of the

[30] *Blaydon Courier*, 19 October 1912.

[31] Holton, *British Syndicalism*, 118, 169–170.

[32] *Durham Chronicle*, 5 April 1912.

largest in the DMA.[33] First, as Lawther was away at Central Labour College during the 1912 strike and had only been a syndicalist at best for a matter of months, his individual influence could not have been telling on his home lodge's April 1912 vote. Indeed, Lawther had not brought militancy to Chopwell: the lodge had been militant since its first strike in 1898, which lasted for seven months and soured relations with the owners to the extent that, by 1914, Chopwell ranked among the most militant lodges in the country.[34] Notwithstanding this industrial militancy, it was clear that the lodge officials were not syndicalists. At the 'Industrial Unionist conference', Chopwell lodge delegate Vipond Hardy expressed his sympathy 'with any movement that made for the advancement of the workers [and that] restricted or restrained officialism', but he voiced scepticism at the syndicalist claim that the union could run effectively by replacing current leaders with delegates who would return to the mines once their union work was done. To get the union's administrative and organisational work done, Hardy argued, necessitated employing clerks with same powers as the current officials.[35] Similarly, the Chopwell lodge president argued that the miners were 'bound to have an executive, to determine if a dispute at a particular colliery was legitimate to force the downing of tools of the whole coalfield'.[36]

Nevertheless, Chopwell miners certainly *did* use tactics advocated by syndicalists. At the same conference, Thomas Barron, the syndicalist

[33] D[urham] R[ecord] O[ffice], D/DMA 12b, DMA tabulated votes for Executive Committee, 6 July 1912;

[34] Marshall, 'Industrial Militancy',101.

[35] *Blaydon Courier*, 19 October 1912; *Durham Chronicle*, 20 June 1913.

[36] *Blaydon Courier*, 19 October 1912.

chairperson, endorsed a 'scientific strike' or 'irritation strike'. This referred to a 'go-slow' recently mounted at Chopwell which –though here unsuccessful– was a tactic advocated in *The Miners' Next Step*.[37] Then, on the night of 9 December 1913, two weeks into another strike, twenty-six coal trucks from a local pit were set loose to run down a hill causing £3,000 worth of damage (about £300,000 today). That same night the Chopwell 'Communist club' opened for the first time.[38] Was this act of industrial sabotage some kind of (anarchist) syndicalist celebration of their newly opened club? The local police certainly commented on this 'strange coincidence', but there was no evidence that those finally arrested (and acquitted) drew their inspiration from –and less so actually were– syndicalists.[39] Indeed, in terms of tactics, sabotage for the syndicalists usually did *not* mean the actual destruction of the means of production, contrary to the critical claims of the SLP.[40] In both cases, the 'sabotage' activities were those traditionally employed by miners from their armoury. That *The Miners' Next Step* advocated some of these methods merely reflected its genesis; born out of industrial dispute and informed by this and earlier struggles. On this point Holton, rather overstated the novelty of these forms of industrial action, and

[37] Point X of *The Miners' Next Step* was 'Lodges should, as far as possible, discard the old method of coming out on strike for any little minor grievance. and adopt the more scientific weapon of the irritation strike by simply remaining at work, reducing their output and so contrive by their general conduct to make the colliery un-remunerative'.

[38] T[yne] and W[ear] A[rchives] S[ervice], T148/1 Copy letters, Superintendent at Felling to Chief Constable of Durham, 11 June 1914 (p.367) and 10 July 1914 (p.451). My thanks to Kevin Davies for drawing my attention to this source.

[39] TWAS, T148/1, Copy letter, 27 December 1913 (p.71).

[40] Brown, *Sabotage!*, 23–40.

unofficial rank-and-file action (against trade union leaders) in general. Both had a long history in the Durham coalfield before 1910.[41]

Of the other lodges represented at the Chopwell 'Industrial Unionist conference', the most noteworthy was St. Hilda whose president, Thomas Barron, was chairperson of the 'Durham Miners' Unofficial Reform Committee' (and the conference itself).[42] Yet, though Barron's official position suggested that syndicalism was a significant force in what was one of the DMA's largest and lodges, St. Hilda only produced a rather unconvincing 59% vote against returning to work in 1912.[43] Indeed, it was telling that very many lodges recording high votes against the 1912 return to work (and often with longstanding reputations for militancy), did *not* send representatives to the conference, though it seems likely that all DMA lodges were invited.[44] In short, there was clearly no easily discernable relationship between syndicalist influence and the degree to which a lodge voted against the return to work in 1912. Furthermore, lodge unofficial strike action in this period was a second rather unreliable indicator of syndicalist influence. Three of the 19 lodges that engaged in (sometimes repeated) unofficial strike action in 1913 had been

[41] Douglass, 'Durham Pitman', 246–266.

[42] *The Syndicalist*, 1 (10), November 1912.

[43] *Durham Chronicle*, 5 April 1912.

[44] *Durham Chronicle*, 5 April 1912. As discussed below, Marsden lodge received an invitation to this conference but there is no record of invitations being received in the less detailed minutes of the smaller Andrews House and Oxhill lodges. A coalfield-wide invitation is also suggested by St. Helen's presence and Chilton lodge's letter of support for the conference, as both were located at the southernmost edge of the Durham coalfield.

represented at the 'Industrial unionist conference'. Yet the three included Chopwell; a militant, but (as seen above) definitely not syndicalist, lodge.[45]

The Chopwell 'Industrial Unionist conference' heard contributions from unnamed delegates varying from wholeheartedly endorsing *The Miners' Next Step* (as it would allow the miners to 'win every fight if they had not a penny behind them') to expressing disquiet about both introducing 'politics' into trade unionism and over the revolutionaries' rejection of nationalisation.[46] Even had there been unanimous support for syndicalism, the total number of conference attendees was also modest considering that the DMA contained over 200 lodges at this time.[47] Furthermore, while the self-styled Durham 'Unofficial Reform committee' claimed this conference was but the first, there appears to have been no follow-up event. For his part, Lawther soon moved away from the ISEL and towards anarchist syndicalism and Barron disappeared from the sources.[48] Indeed, Barron was no 'anti-political' activist even at this time, as he stood unsuccessfully for election to South Shields council in November 1912.[49]

The central DMA records reveal that considerable numbers of lodges were severely critical of their leaders, sought reforms of their union's rules in order to democratise it and were also interested in amalgamation of all unions within the

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[45] N[orth] E[ast] E[ngland] M[ining] A[rchive] and R[esearch] C[entre], Sunderland, NUMDA/1/6/39, Wilson's Monthly Circular, No.217, January 1914.

[46] *Blaydon Courier*, 19 October 1912..

[47] DRO, D/DMA 12b, DMA tabulated votes for Executive Committee, 6 July 1912.

[48] *The Syndicalist*, 1 (10), November 1912.

[49] *Evening Chronicle*, 1 November 1912.

coalfield.[50] While all these *might* have indicated a syndicalist-influenced agenda, more obvious, given this climate, was the DMA leadership's siege mentality and their attempts to ascribe lodge discontent to malign influences that included syndicalism. Another barometer of lodge feeling was the DMA's annual gala when upwards of 100,000 miners and their families congregated in the city of Durham on a Saturday every July. Lodges proposed the names of prospective speakers for the 'big meeting' and then voted for four to be invited. The July 1911 gala came soon after the first visit of South Wales miners' 'missionaries' to the Durham coalfield, rallying support for a national coal strike. For DMA leader John Wilson, the 'interjectionary manner' of the crowd –he was subject to sustained heckling when speaking against the proposed strike– demonstrated that the South Wales missionaries' 'misconceptions' had taken hold in Durham.[51]

Even worse for Wilson, the lodges had elected the maverick and charismatic firebrand Victor Grayson as one of the guest speakers for the 1911 gala (he had first spoken at the gala in 1909).[52] From the platform Grayson urged a sympathy strike for the Welsh miners and responded to a comment from the crowd attacking leaders that '… the world has been crushed by leaders. Let the workers realise their individuality and take action…'. Grayson, who briefly had been an

[50] While there were no votes at DMA council on explicit syndicalist resolutions, it is not certain that the Executive Committee did not rule such initiatives 'Out of Order' without detailing the nature of the resolution in its minutes.

[51] DRO, D/DMA (Acc: 2157(D)) 202(box), Wilson's Monthly circular No.187, July 1911; *Durham Chronicle*, 28 July 1911.

[52] *Durham Chronicle*, 30 July 1909.; Morgan, *Labour People*, 64–68.

MP, then attacked the Parliamentary system.[53] For Wilson, Grayson had 'descended to the lowest depth', the speech designed merely to feed Grayson's desire for 'evoking applause and gaining popularity'.[54] Certainly, Grayson was not an overt syndicalist, but his speech, with its distinctly (anarchist?) syndicalist tinge, was well received by the crowd.[55] Yet there were clearly contrasting moods among the rank-and-file at the 1911 gala; Wilson's moderate speech also received loud applause, with a section of his audience apparently keen on throwing his militant interlocutor into the nearby river.

With the vote in favour of a national strike and the birth of *The Miners' Next Step* in early 1912, the situation worsened for Wilson. In spring 1912, the local press fed the growing fear of syndicalism, emphasising its influence during the national strike and warning that if continued, the strike could destroy civilisation 'in one devastating maelstrom of disaster'.[56]. That Durham miners had just voted 2-1 against returning to work, contrary to advice from Wilson (and the local press), must have set alarm bells ringing. The return of South Wales missionaries to Durham in May 1912, ably supported by Lawther, provoked another attack from Wilson who was explicit that their 'aim is syndicalism and therefore in favour of a pure strike policy … I hope it is not necessary for me to urge caution in accepting teaching of that kind'.[57] While South Wales syndicalist William Ferris Hay's Durham propaganda meetings were fairly

[53] *Durham Chronicle,* 28 July 1911.

[54] DRO, D/DMA (Acc: 2157(D)) 202(box), Wilson's Monthly circular No.187, July 1911.

[55] *Durham Chronicle,* 28 July 1911.

[56] *Durham Chronicle,* 1 March 1912; 5 April 1912.

[57] DRO, D/DMA 12a, Wilson's Monthly circular No.197, May 1912.

poorly reported, they seem to have been well attended and broadly well received.[58]

The annual galas continued to be a source of discomfort for Wilson. In 1912, Tom Mann became another controversial lodge choice among the gala speakers. Mann was recently out of gaol after *The Syndicalist* reproduced the 'Don't shoot' leaflet urging soldiers not to fire on strikers.[59] While he did not mention syndicalism explicitly at the gala, Mann did express the basic crux of his aim that the workers, through their own intelligence and organisation, would one day have democratic control of industry. Mann's reception was broadly good; he was loudly cheered before beginning his speech and after his closing line. George Lansbury, a more mainstream Labour speaker also captured the mood. Cheers greeted his call for solidarity with the London dockers' strike and for a 'real union of unions so they could down tools together if they had to down tools at all… if the labour movement stood for anything at all it was the destruction of the profit system and the wage system…'[60]

Then, in 1914, the lodges elected Jim Larkin, leader of the Irish transport workers, as a gala speaker.[61] The leadership clearly feared the potential implications of this choice, despite the DMA Executive Committee having proposed a £150 grant to Dublin strikers in October 1913.[62] In January 1914,

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[58] *Durham Chronicle*, 31 May 1912.

[59] See Fletcher, 'Prosecutions'.

[60] *Durham Chronicle*, 2 August 1912.

[61] *Durham Chronicle*, 27 March 1914.

[62] DRO, D/DMA 30, DMA Council Meeting minutes, 18 October 1913.

Wilson launched an unusually outspoken attack, decrying Larkin's arrogance.[63] At the gala Larkin's counter-attack on trade union leaders and politicians, his call for direct action and suggestion that the miners would be beaten 'not by the owners but by the enemy within their own camp' received murmurs of endorsement from sections of the crowd.[64]

At first sight, the support for the South Wales missionaries and Mann and Larkin's gala appearances suggest that syndicalist ideas resonated strongly in the Durham coalfield. But, these endorsements did not necessarily reflect mass and active commitment to an overt syndicalist programme. Mann was well-known at a national level long before his syndicalist days. He visited Durham mining villages as a socialist organiser in 1887 and spoke at four consecutive Durham galas (1897 to 1900). On the last occasion Mann's attack on Wilson's opposition to the eight hour day caused considerable controversy, drawing stinging criticism from loyalists.[65] In 1912, support from the mainstream of the labour movement could revolve around Mann's right to free speech (after his imprisonment) rather than endorsing what he was actually saying.[66] Similar observations apply to the solidarity for Larkin and the locked-out Dublin transport workers. Again, the issue was the State's over reaction. Thus, the DMA council carried a lodge resolution expressing an 'emphatic protest against the rash, unjustifiable and brutal' police baton charge on Dublin strikers and

[63] *Durham Chronicle*, 2 January 1914.

[64] *Durham Chronicle*, 31 July 1914.

[65] *Durham Chronicle*, 30 July 1897; 22 July 1898; 28 July 1899; 26 July 1901; Mann, *Memoirs*, 46–47; Tsuzuki, *Mann*, 26–28.

[66] Holton, *British Syndicalism*,117.

demanding an enquiry into the state's actions in October 1913.[67] Interestingly, even the Liberal *Durham Chronicle* expressed qualified support for the Dublin strikers.[68] In any case, according to the ISEL itself, Larkinism was far from synonymous with syndicalism.[69] Finally, in all these cases the militants were elected to speak alongside more moderate labour movement figures and Liberals. In 1912, for example, these were Ramsay Macdonald, Enoch Edwards MP and Lloyd George (Mann came fourth in the ballot).[70] Clearly, the militants represented but one of several political tendencies within the DMA.

The surviving lodge records clearly illustrate how even those who took part in manifestations of militant anger, and/or showed solidarity with syndicalists, did not, on the whole, appear to gravitate towards syndicalism itself. Oxhill lodge called for the resignation of DMA leaders in both 1910 (over the Three Shift System) and 1912 (over their agreement to return to work without lodge endorsement), supported the Welsh missionaries in summer 1911 and made a grant to the Dublin transport workers in 1913. Similarly, Andrew's House lodge, a small pit, protested against the Three Shift System, financially supported the striking South Wales miners in late 1910 and 1911 and, like Oxhill, endorsed the petition for the imprisoned Tonypandy rioters in spring 1912.[71] Yet no firm

[67] DRO, D/DMA 30, DMA Council Meeting minutes, 18 October 1913.

[68] *Durham Chronicle*, 5 September 1913.

[69] 'Mugwumps on the make' in *The Syndicalist and Amalgamation News*, 3 (2), February 1914.

[70] In the event, Lloyd George and Edwards did not speak and the Labour figures George Lansbury and Tom Richardson MP replaced them. DRO, D/DMA 12a, 'Election of Gala speakers' 25 May 1912; *Durham Chronicle*, 2 August 1912.

[71] Oxhill and Andrew's House lodges voted 73% and 78% against the return to work in April 1912 respectively. DRO, D/DMA (Acc: 2157(D)) 230 (vol)), Oxhill Lodge Ordinary Meeting Minutes, 16 July 1910; General Meeting, 6 July 1911; Committee Meeting, 2 January 1912;

evidence of any interest in syndicalism itself exists in either of these lodges' minute books.[72]

In Marsden lodge, organised in a large modern pit in the far north-west of the coalfield, the fortunes of evenly balanced militant and moderate factions' ebbed and flowed in this tumultuous period. Marsden did not oppose the Three Shift System and showed its loyalty to the leadership at the December 1911 AGM by nominating all the incumbent officials for re-election.[73] Yet, by March 1912 it was organising a public meeting protesting at Mann's arrest. The protest resolution made clear that the discrepancy in Mann's treatment when 'compared with the recent utterances of others in higher circles on the Irish question' was the issue rather than support for his syndicalist project. This was underlined when, at the same time, the lodge organised a public meeting praising Labour MPs' efforts to make the Minimum Wage Bill 'workable and acceptable'.[74]

Special Meeting, 10 April 1912; Ordinary Meeting, 6 November 1913; DRO, D/DMA (Acc: 2157(D)) 165 (vol), Andrew's House Lodge Minutes, General Meetings, 24 December 1910; 7 January 1911; 28 December 1911; 1 May 1913; Special Meeting, 4 May 1913; *Durham Chronicle*, 14 January 1910; 5 April 1912.

[72] Firm evidence could have been, for example, lodges sending delegates to syndicalist conferences, buying syndicalist propaganda, discussing syndicalism explicitly and passing resolutions supporting it.

[73] DRO, D/DMA 30, Special Council Meeting on Eight Hours Agreement, 7 October 1911; DRO, D/DMA (Acc: 2157(D)) 202(box), DMA Council Annual meeting programme, 16 December 1911.

[74] DRO, D/DMA 327/3, Marsden Lodge Joint Meeting Minutes, 26 March 1912 and attached undated newspaper article.

Furthermore, Marsden lodge voted for four more moderate Labour figures as DMA 1912 gala speakers, rather than for Mann.[75]

Though voting a fairly low 62% against returning to work in April 1912, Marsden became increasingly critical of the DMA executive in 1912. In September it even donated £3 to an appeal from Harvey's court defence fund (in the libel trial with Wilson). Yet, in late October, the lodge committee still rejected by 27-16 votes an invitation to attend Harvey's Industrial Union conference in Chester-le-Street.[76] This was consistent with its voting shortly before (by the far closer margin of 16-14) *not* to be represented at the Chopwell 'Industrial Unionist conference'. In June 1913, Marsden lodge committee voted on proposed organisational affiliations, including to the 'industrial union' (presumably Harvey's). The result was a heavy (14-3) vote against affiliation.[77] In October and November 1913 the lodge chose Larkin among its four gala speakers, sent £40 to support those locked-out in Dublin and called on the DMA to hold a special council meeting on the subject. Yet a lodge meeting in November 1913 voted 30-5 against putting the proposal to join Harvey's industrial union to a full lodge membership ballot.[78] One or two Marsden lodge committee activists repeatedly raised the subject of the industrial union at these

[75] DRO, D/DMA 327/3, Marsden Lodge Joint Meeting Minutes, 26 March 1912.

[76] This must have been the meeting that launched Harvey's 'Durham Mining Industrial Union Group' in November 1912. *Evening Chronicle*, 7 November 1912; *Durham Chronicle*, 15 November 1912.

[77] DRO, D/DMA 327/4, Marsden Lodge Joint Meeting Minutes, 8 September 1912; Joint Meeting, 27 October 1912; Joint Meeting, 6 October 1912; DRO, D/DMA 327/5, Marsden Lodge Joint Meeting Minutes, 8 June 1913; *Durham Chronicle*, 5 April 1912.

[78] DRO, D/DMA 327/5, Marsden Lodge Joint Meetings Minutes 5; 19 October 1913; 16, 23 November 1913.

special half yearly lodge meetings, but it never even approached eliciting majority support.

Notwithstanding this, Durham syndicalists clearly exercised a greater degree of influence than Church and Outram suggested, though in practice identifying a reliable gauge to measure it, even the snap-shot of a particular DMA vote, is problematic. Similarly, the Durham lodges' choice of certain speakers at annual galas was suggestive more of a general militant and discontented mood among a section of the rank-and-file rather than hard evidence of widespread support –or even potential support– for syndicalism. Indeed, in comparison with the South Wales, syndicalism had a rather limited impact in Durham.[79] In South Wales, syndicalists inaugurated the collaborative process that involved hundreds of militants and produced *The Miners' Next Step*. Its first print run of 5,000 was sold out within weeks of publication.[80] Before this, at least three syndicalists had served on the Cambrian Combine strike committee and two were subsequently elected to the SWMF Executive Committee in 1911. Syndicalists' initiatives to centralise and democratise the SWMF received significant lodge support. The June 1912 SWMF annual conference saw a delegate card vote in favour of union centralisation (by 1,148 to 896 votes) and in September a full membership ballot voted to abolish the SWMF districts (to prepare for increased centralisation).[81] The union was also at the forefront of the wider campaign for a miners' minimum wage, a key syndicalist demand because it would help to bankrupt the

[79] Davies noted the impossibility of measuring syndicalist influence in South Wales due to their changing politics and so forth concluding that the volume of their support was 'unquantifiable'. Davies, 'Syndicalism and Industrial Unionism', 7.

[80] *The Miners' Next Step*, foreword; Holton, *British Syndicalism*, 112.

[81] Davies, 'Syndicalism and Industrial Unionism', 71.

coal owners.[82] In Durham, the only comparable successes were those of George Harvey. His first pamphlet sold 2,000 copies and gained him invitations to speak throughout the Durham coalfield in summer 1911.[83] The 1912 libel trial and other activity enabled Harvey to build a following that culminated in 1913 with his election –on a revolutionary platform– as checkweighman in Follonsby pit (near Gateshead).[84] This was a significant achievement considering the high degree of trust required in order to be elected a checkweighman, and was even more impressive given that the pit was some distance from where Harvey had been active.[85] But, in contrast to South Wales, no Durham syndicalists were elected onto the DMA Executive Committee, nor did they lead major industrial disputes in the coalfield, nor head up the minimum wage agitation.

Why did Syndicalist influence differ?

The explanation of the syndicalists' relative failure to achieve influence in the Durham coalfield divides broadly into contextual and more contingent considerations. In terms of the former, firstly, the DMA had thirty years longer existence than the SWMF in which to establish more firmly among its members traditions of loyalty to the leadership and deference to the rule book and to the institution as such. The South Wales miners had a reputation of relative

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[82] Holton, *British Syndicalism*, 80–85, 112, 119–120; Davies, *Cook*, 17.

[83] Challinor, *British Bolshevism*, 117; Walker, 'Harvey article', 21; Douglass, 'Durham Pitman', 290. (Both Walker and Dave Douglass commented on Harvey's impressive writing style).

[84] *Evening Chronicle*, 7 November 1912; *Newcastle Journal*, 8 November 1912; *The Socialist*, June 1913, quoted in Walker, 'Harvey thesis', 40.

[85] Given this, it was odd for Holton to remark that Harvey had no standing in the DMA. While a position on the Executive Committee would have indicated standing in the central union, his checkweighman post was of significant status in the locality. Holton, *British Syndicalism*, 113.

quiescence and disorganisation until the late 1890s peak of the rush for Rhondda coal sparked a growing trend towards militancy and the formation of the SWMF. The gulf between the Lib-Lab leaders and a militant rank-and-file that had substantial room for autonomous action was clearly greater than in the DMA from the outset. In the early 1900s, the owners responded to falling productivity by forming combines of collieries and cutting miners' wages. Real wages began falling in 1903, living standards followed and in response the strongly unionised miners became 70% more strike-prone than their counterparts in any other British coalfield before 1910.[86] More specifically, Hywel Francis has suggested that the syndicalist tendency was strengthened in South Wales by the presence of a Spanish anarchist community.[87] While the basis for Francis' claim appeared rather flimsy, there certainly appeared no equivalent influence in the Durham coalfield. Nevertheless, even with deference, loyalty and constitutionalism being longer established in the DMA, the rank-and-file discontent with the leadership and with wages and conditions was still widespread and strongly-felt. There was only a slight difference of degrees between the attitudes of many Durham and South Wales miners from 1910; more remarkable considering quite how firmly embedded figures like Wilson (and their politics) were in the union. Similarly, the Durham coal owners' deployment of various devious means to minimise their losses when the minimum wage came into operation further fuelled the discontent.

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[86] Egan, 'Miners' Next Step', 10; Holton, *British Syndicalism*, 79; Davies, 'Syndicalism and Industrial Unionism', 36–52; Davies, *Cook*, 3–8. For an excellent comparative study that suggests some reasons for the different levels of militancy in the two coalfields before 1914 see Daunton, 'Down the Pit'.

[87] Francis, *Miners against Fascism*, 33.

The recent history of South Wales militancy provided the context for the Cambrian Combine dispute, which clearly generated interest in syndicalism in the district. Again, there were echoes of the Cambrian Combine episode in the bitter dispute in Durham in 1910. The origins of both were related to the implementation of the Eight Hours Act, although the precise issues differed, and the Durham dispute never became official. A militant mood was evident in the considerable number of Durham lodges (67) calling for their leaders' resignation in 1910.[88] Rank-and-file anger was directed at DMA agents who were also politicians and –by extension– the political system itself. For example, 8,000 miners protested at the hustings of Gateshead MP (and DMA agent) John Johnson. Their protest became a riot, foreshadowing the later Tonypandy riots.[89]

Nevertheless, there were significant differences between the disputes. The Durham conflict lacked the longevity and sustained numbers and intensity of the Cambrian Combine dispute.[90] While both ended in defeat, the experience of the Cambrian Combine strike generated a wider interest in syndicalism; syndicalist pamphlets had circulated widely and the authorities recognised their popular appeal.[91] Craig Marshall suggested that in Durham, too, discontent surrounding the Three Shift System dispute 'may well have provided the syndicalists with

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[88] DRO, D/DMA 11, Result of vote calling for resignation of the agents and Executive Committee, 12 February 1910; *Durham Chronicle*, 31 December 1909; 18 February 1910.

[89] *Durham Chronicle*, 21, 28 January 1910; Smith, 'Tonypandy 1910', 158–184.

[90] *Durham Chronicle*, 14 January 1910; 11 February 1910; 8 April 1910; 'Report on Strikes and Lock-outs and on Conciliation and Arbitration Boards in the United Kingdom in 1913', American Libraries Internet archive, http://www.archive.org/details/cu31924091712293 (accessed 17 April 2010), 80–81.

[91] Davies, *Cook*, 12.

some temporary support'.[92] But this dispute came a little too early, ending a few months before the Cambrian strike began. Mann's *Industrial Syndicalist* was not running until July 1910, which left only Harvey, fairly recently out of Ruskin, to make syndicalist propaganda in the coalfield. A good proportion of the lodges present at the 1912 Chopwell 'Industrial Unionist conference' protested against the Three Shift System, and two struck for a few days against it, but there is no firm evidence that any of the 14 most militant lodges in 1910 was definitely interested in syndicalism at any point.[93]

In spite of the conditions not being quite as propitious for the development of syndicalism in the Durham coalfield as in South Wales, they were nonetheless very promising. As demonstrated above, at least two of Marcel van der Linden's and Wayne Thorpe's criteria for syndicalism to succeed –the general growth of a radical mood and changes of labour processes– existed in the Durham coalfield.[94] Indeed, the two were linked in so far as the implementation of the Three Shift System provoked an angry and radical mood in sections of the rank-and-file.

It is clear that syndicalism *could* have developed much further than it did in Durham and that various contingent factors, including fortune, timing and individual political judgements played a part. In short, agency was crucial. Given the role that Ruskin and the Central Labour College played in making revolutionary syndicalists, it proved portentous for Durham syndicalists that their union sent notably fewer students to these centres of radicalisation than did

[92] Marshall, 'Industrial Militancy', 336.

[93] *Durham Chronicle*, 14, 28 January 1910; 11 February 1910; 8 April 1910.

[94] van der Linden, 'Second thoughts',188.

the SWMF. The SWMF had a scholarship scheme for the CLC making connections especially strong.[95] By contrast, the DMA continued to support the more mainstream Ruskin College. Significantly, the CLC received no mentions in the surviving records of any DMA institutions of this period. Will Lawther was only able to attend thanks to sponsorship from his militant lodge, Chopwell, as well as familial financial backing.[96] In terms of timing, Lawther's ability and energy came a little too late for syndicalism. He was still in London during the 1912 national strike, arguably the high-water mark of syndicalist influence in the British coalfields.[97] Lawther's relative youth and inexperience, too, may explain some of the more unhelpful ways that his politics developed.

Lawther's syndicalism meant that he did not stand for office after returning from CLC, effectively ruling out a return to a lodge position that would have accorded him considerable influence. (Lawther was elected vice-chair of Chopwell lodge in 1906 and shortly after became lodge delegate to the DMA.)[98] This contrasted with, for example, A.J. Cook, who overlapped with Lawther at CLC and who, though a syndicalist, took a lodge chair's position on his return to South Wales. Indeed, Durham's Thomas Barron demonstrated that syndicalists could also be effective lodge officials. Harvey, for his part, was instrumental in getting the SLP to end its bar on party members holding trade union office

[95] Macintyre, *Proletarian Science*, 81–85.

[96] *Newcastle Journal*, 16 March 1955.

[97] In Durham the high watermark was arguably between May and November 1912 (see below). White, 'Syndicalism', 108, 114.

[98] *Newcastle Journal*, 11 March 1955.

(reaping the benefits with his checkweighman post).[99] This, in turn, meant Harvey began receiving nominations for significant positions in the DMA. His name went forward as a delegate to the MFGB and TUC conferences, as a member of the County Federation Board, as a DMA Parliamentary candidate and a member of the Executive. In every case Harvey's name was one among many and he did not come close to securing any elected position before 1914. But at least he was in the running, even though he was a dual unionist and thus theoretically committed to replacing the DMA with a new revolutionary industrial union.[100] By contrast, Lawther's (in many respects laudable) principles robbed Durham miners of the opportunity to demonstrate their support for him.

Similarly, Lawther's complete rejection of 'political action' did not appear to resonate with many Durham miners; certainly not with many militants at his own pit, if the pro-political action comments of several delegates at the Chopwell 'Industrial Unionist conference' were indicative.[101] Faith in Parliamentary redress was perhaps understandable in a region where standard democratic discourse was so well entrenched, within Methodism as well as liberalism. Indeed, Lawther's sharp contrasting of what he deemed counter-productive political action and essential industrial action was particularly

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[99] Walker, 'Harvey thesis', passim; Douglass, 'Durham Pitman', 288; Challinor, 'Jack Parks', 37; Challinor, *British Bolshevism*, 116–118.

[100] NEEMARC, NUMDA/1/6/39, 'Nominations of Representatives at Miners' Federation Conference' (2 February 1914); 'Nominations of Representatives for TUC'; 'Nominees for Parliamentary candidates' (27 February 1914); 'Election of Executive Committee first time'; Election of Federation Board Representatives (14 July 1914).

[101] *Blaydon Courier*, 19 October 1912.

discordant at a time when the ILP in County Durham was successfully blurring precisely this distinction with its minimum wage campaign (see below). Even the failure of the Northumberland miners' sponsored bill to abolish the Three Shift System in Northumberland (and Durham) in late May 1914 did not seem immediately to shake this widespread faith in political action.[102] By contrast, Harvey's clarity on the need for the organised working-class to take political action, albeit from a strictly revolutionary platform, sidestepped the objections aimed at Lawther.

That said, Harvey's support for 'dual unionism', in line with SLP policy, was unlikely to attract many Durham miners. The DMA (and Northumberland miners) were the only two miners' district unions in the country that allowed colliery surface workers to join. Thus, there was a good case that, within the 'quasi industrial union structure of the MFGB', there was less road to travel for the north-east miners' unions to realise their industrial unionist potential than for any other miners' district union.[103] A radical overhaul of the existing DMA machinery, at least in the short-term, was perhaps more obviously achievable and desirable considering the Durham miners' historic attachment to their union. Indeed, with its high membership and extensive finances making it 'undoubtedly the strongest trade union in the country' in 1912, there were good practical reasons for its members to stand by it, and for syndicalists to try to re-shape it in their own image.[104] This was an issue where Lawther was initially strong as in May 1912 he effectively endorsed *The Miners' Next Step* position of reforming

[102] *Durham Chronicle*, 29 May 1914.

[103] *Durham Chronicle*, 5 April 1912; White, 'Syndicalism', 113.

[104] *Durham Chronicle*, 26 July 1912.

existing unions.[105] But he subsequently became rather reticent on this crucial issue, contributing to both 'bore from within' and dual unionist anarchist journals.[106] While both the leading Durham syndicalists at various times advocated positions on political action and dual unionism that failed to appeal to wider sections of militant Durham miners, this might easily have been otherwise. In terms of dual unionism, Noah Ablett, like Harvey, encountered the SLP while at Ruskin in 1907. On returning to South Wales, however, Ablett's enthusiasm for dual unionism evaporated when he realised that most miners merely desired reform of their existing organisation.[107]

In terms of political action, W.F. Hay, the most 'anti-politics' of South Wales syndicalists, nevertheless pragmatically tailored his rhetoric to the audience.[108] Thus, when speaking in the Durham coalfield, Hay's strategic maturity was evident in his emphasis on the immediately practical elements of *The Miners' Next Step,* such as internal reform of the SWMF, rather than its revolutionary ends. Indeed on this occasion he entirely neglected to mention political action. Certainly, the ambiguity of *The Miners' Next Step* on political action was in some respects a strength, as activists could emphasise the part of it they agreed with. In his West Stanley speech Hay even entertained the possibility that miners could have paid officers (as long as they came from the coalface).[109] This point, had it been made, would have circumvented some of the objections put by

[105] *Durham Chronicle,* 31 May 1912; *Blaydon Courier,* 1 June 1912; *The Miners' Next Step,* passim; White, 'Syndicalism', 112.

[106] *Blaydon Courier,* 19 October 1912; Holton, *British Syndicalism,* 142–3.

[107] Davies, 'Syndicalism and Industrial Unionism', 66, 72; Davies, *Cook,* 10.

[108] See Davies, 'Rival Prophets?' and Williams, *Democratic Rhondda,* 204–205.

[109] *Blaydon Courier,* 1 June 1912.

miner militants like Vipond Hardy to syndicalism at the Chopwell 'Industrial Unionist conference' of October 1912. Pragmatism was similarly evident when South Wales syndicalists soft-pedalled the revolutionary elements of their politics in order to concentrate efforts on the minimum wage issue before and during the 1912 strike.[110] Hay's influence on Lawther was apparent in the very similar way in which the latter talked about syndicalism at these particular Durham coalfield meetings.[111]

Hay's influence did not last, however. For reasons relating to the precise forms of syndicalism they came to embrace and the rigidness with which they interpreted either actual party lines or the specifics of ideological positions, both Harvey and Lawther failed to strike a pragmatic balance when advocating their vision of revolutionary syndicalism in the Durham coalfield. This was most clear when both men spoke from the same platform at the Chopwell 'Industrial Unionist conference'. While Lawther downplayed the differences between the revolutionaries, Harvey did the opposite, arguing that Lawther's syndicalism was merely a 'halfway house' towards industrial unionism, which was the 'higher pinnacle of organisation'.[112] Harvey's sectarianism also often mimicked that of De Leon.[113] Lawther, by contrast, was no vicious sectarian: he publicly supported Harvey over the Wilson libel case as well as sharing a platform with him at the Durham miners' gala in July 1913.[114] Interestingly, the request for Harvey's 'Northern Industrial Union' to use the gala platforms once the official

[110] Holton, *British Syndicalism*, 119.

[111] *Durham Chronicle*, 31 May 1912.

[112] *Blaydon Courier*, 19 October 1912.

[113] Brown (introduction), *Industrial Syndicalist*, 19; Page Arnot, *South Wales Miners*, 376.

[114] *The Herald of Revolt*, February 1913; *Freedom*, September 1913.

DMA speakers had finished is the only reference to it in the central DMA records. In February 1913, the Executive allowed Harvey the use of No.1 platform for the gala of that year.[115] A year later, however, the Executive allowed a similar request to 'rest over' and it seemed that the industrial union was replaced by a women's suffrage group as favoured occupiers of the vacant gala platforms.[116] Nevertheless, sectarian or not, Harvey and Lawther offered the miners two different (and competing) versions of syndicalism. Not surprisingly, the delegates' response to them at the Chopwell conference revealed confusion over terminologies and their meanings.

By contrast, the South Wales syndicalists maintained a pragmatic and effective degree of unity (in spite of differences in approach and emphasis) around one key document. While Harvey's pamphlets were well researched and written they lacked the sheer punch of *The Miners' Next Step.* They were also the result of one man's endeavours rather than emerging from the experience of many, recently steeled in bitter industrial struggle. Harvey's chosen party, the SLP, was increasingly outmanoeuvred on the industrial side by the ISEL syndicalists. By the outbreak of war SLP membership –at best stubbornly small– was diminishing.[117] Lawther's anarchism was perhaps more theoretically coherent than the rather less well defined South Wales miners' syndicalism. But this also meant that Lawther sacrificed potential support from significant national and international syndicalist figures. He found himself relatively isolated from the rest of the syndicalist world, a world that in terms of the exchange of ideas and

[115] NEEMARC, NUMDA/1/6/38, DMA Executive Committee Minutes, 11 February 1913.

[116] NEEMARC, NUMDA/1/6/39, DMA Executive Committee Minutes, 23 March 1914 and 28 April 1914.

[117] Challinor, *British Bolshevism*, 118–121.

activists was remarkably internationalist. The South Wales syndicalists, by contrast, enjoyed considerable support from Tom Mann, who visited them in the coalfield on several occasions, as did international figures such as Bill Haywood of the IWW.[118] And, even when anarchist syndicalism became better organised and its 'bore from within' wing more popular in 1914, it did not sweep all before it on the revolutionary left. Durham syndicalists thus lacked a single properly unified and long-lived organisation like the South Wales 'Unofficial Reform Committee' and their own version of *The Miners' Next Step*; and unity was arguably even more essential given their relative lack of numbers. Instead, they organised in disparate groupings formed around local charismatic leaders who vied with each other for support, lacking the strategic maturity that activists such as Hay and Ablett brought to the South Wales milieu. Here Harvey and Lawther's 'extremism' lay in their relatively dogmatic approach to propagandising syndicalist politics.

A final –and crucial– consideration was that the syndicalists could not lead the Durham coalfield's mass minimum wage movement even had they wanted to; the ILP had got there first. Indeed, it was emblematic that other DMA ex-Ruskin students, most notably Jack Lawson (who was at Ruskin at the same time as Harvey), played a key role. In summer 1911, Lawson and fellow ILP activists of lodges near Chester-le-Street, organised the first meetings of the minimum wage movement (MWM). This rank-and-file movement campaigned for the minimum wage and, after it was won in 1912, for improvements in its scope, administration and wage levels. The MWM dwarfed the syndicalist challenge. In 1912, its conferences attracted delegates from between fifty and sixty lodges,

[118] Howell, 'Syndicalism', 29; Davies, 'Syndicalism and Industrial Unionism', 128.

with a membership of 40,000 (approaching half of the DMA's adult membership) and it claimed the support of many more lodges.[119] The attendance (or interest) of nine lodges at the Chopwell 'Industrial Unionist conference' (not all of which even supported syndicalism) paled in comparison.

While ILP activists were leading the Durham minimum wage agitation, as syndicalists were doing in South Wales, their wider programme also occupied political space where the syndicalists might have been. The movement campaigned for the DMA to pursue a more militant and aggressive industrial policy.[120] It also mounted a stringent critique of the existing DMA leadership, working to democratise the DMA in order to wrest it from Lib-Lab control. Agitation for a consolidation of miners' industrial forces from MWM platforms was less intensive than that of the syndicalists, though the 1913 DMA AGM considered resolutions from sympathetic movement lodges to this effect.[121] On occasion, movement leaders made rhetorical allusions to a wider union of all workers that sounded distinctively syndicalist and it also welcomed the emergence of the Triple Alliance in 1914.[122] Given this, lodge initiatives on any of these issues were more likely to have been inspired or informed by involvement in the ILP's MWM than evidence of syndicalist influence.

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[119] *Durham Chronicle*, 7 June 1912.

[120] See, for example, the report in *Durham Chronicle*, 19 July 1912.

[121] See the South Moor and Marsden lodges' resolutions passed at the 1913 DMA AGM. DRO, D/DMA 30, DMA Annual Council Meeting, 20, 22, 23, 24 December 1913; *Durham Chronicle*, 5 April 1912.

[122] *Durham Chronicle*, 8 September 1911; 10 April 1914; 7 August 1914.

Although attitudes of individual ILP activists towards syndicalism differed, the movement's leaders stood for both industrial and political action, which meant supporting the Labour Party. And, while often appropriating syndicalism's languages and ideas, they also defined themselves explicitly against syndicalism.[123] This was probably an effort to deflect Wilson's attempts to tarnish them, by using the term 'syndicalist' in the same way as later generations of Labour leaders employed the term 'communist' to discredit certain of their left critics. Certainly, Wilson's fairly consistent attacks suggested that the MWM, and *not* syndicalism, represented the greater threat.[124]

The MWM –*the* mass rank-and-file movement in the coalfield– was the key to syndicalist influence. On the one hand, it appeared that there was little room for syndicalists. The ILP activists who ran it had managed to channel considerable lodge discontent, on which syndicalism could have fed, into essentially *reformist* demands however militantly worded. Yet, the syndicalists (of *The Miners' Next Step* tradition at least) wanted to take the movements' agitation for a democratic and militant DMA (far**)** further. Moreover, militant elements in the MWM were broadly favourable to aspects of the revolutionaries' case, and were surely open to influence. This was suggested by the Chopwell 'Industrial Unionist conference' where at least seven of the lodges represented (and probably all of them) actively supported the MWM.[125] While scepticism persisted about fundamental aspects of the syndicalist project (such as workers' control over nationalisation), these lodges were clearly interested enough to

[123] See reports in *Durham Chronicle*, 7 June 1912; 23 August 1912; 6 December 1912.

[124] See for example the DMA Executive Committee circular; 'The District meetings. Why are they held?', 15 May 1912 in DRO, D/DMA 12a.

[125] *Blaydon Courier*, 19 October 1912; *Durham Chronicle*, 18 October 1912; 31 January 1913.

debate it - and there always remained the *possibility* of such discussions leading to further radicalisation. This possibility was hinted at, too, when the minimum wage award of October 1913 maintained its unpopular low level. The angry response in the local press included contributions from Lawther and Harvey, the latter's interventions securing support from at least one apparently uninitiated miner correspondent. Yet these two syndicalists were inevitably swamped by militant contributions from the main MWM activists and others.[126]

That there was some relationship between rank-and-file attitudes to the MWM and syndicalism is suggested in Marsden lodge's minutes. The same lodge committee meeting that saw a majority of two votes against being represented at the Chopwell 'Industrial Unionist conference' decided –also by two votes– in favour of sending lodge delegates to a MWM conference. This suggests that most of the pro-MWM militants on the Marsden lodge committee would go as far as sending delegates to a syndicalist organised event. While a lodge meeting in December 1912 voted 26-20 to withdraw from the MWM, Marsden's partial radicalisation in 1912, indicated by involvement in the MWM, seems to have put syndicalist events and causes onto the lodge committee's agenda as well, even if they were to go no further.[127]

Considering the wider chronology reveals another link between the MWM and syndicalism. Syndicalism's potential in Durham appeared to be growing from summer 1911 (with the first visit of the South Wales missionaries and the popularity of Harvey's first pamphlet) and peaked the following year. 1912 saw

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[126] *Evening Chronicle*, 28, 31 October 1913; 1 November 1913.

[127] DRO, D/DMA 327/4, Marsden Lodge Joint Meeting Minutes, 6 October 1912 and 8 December 1912.

the national coal strike in spring, South Wales syndicalists propagandising again in May, Mann speaking at the July gala and then the Chopwell 'Industrial Unionist conference' and Harvey's libel trial in the autumn. It was perhaps no coincidence that the last time Wilson attacked syndicalism explicitly was in November 1912, immediately after the Harvey libel trial. This chronology broadly matched that of the MWM, founded in summer 1911 and growing in 1912. Unlike in South Wales where the fallout from the 1912 strike helped to increase syndicalist influence, the growing attendance at the MWM's meetings after April 1912 suggested that it had been the chief beneficiary of the national strike in the Durham coalfield.[128] This chronology certainly suggests that the syndicalists and the MWM were benefitting from the same rank-and-file discontent; but the latter far more so than the former. While the MWM experienced ebbs and flows in its fortunes after 1912, syndicalist influence in Durham seemed to be on the wane by mid-1913. The same process also occurred in South Wales albeit slightly later. Certainly, by late 1913, militant activity in the South Wales coalfield had slumped, the syndicalists' organisation was moribund and A.J. Cook thought the 1914 SWMF conference the tamest he had ever seen, completely bereft of revolutionary ardour.[129]

The Durham syndicalists' response to the MWM was complex and even contradictory. Thomas Barron spoke on MWM platforms before organising openly as a syndicalist in autumn 1912.[130] Lawther, by contrast, repeatedly defined his project of fomenting what he deemed a 'real' rank-and-file

[128] *Durham Chronicle*, 10 May 1912; 7 June 1912; 22 November 1912; Holton, *British Syndicalism*, 120.

[129] Holton, *British Syndicalism*, 120–1; Davies, *Cook*, 17–19.

[130] *Durham Chronicle*, 25 August 1911; 1 September 1911; 1 March 1912.

movement as being *against* the MWM whose leaders, he claimed, were mere careerists.[131] In strong contrast to the South Wales syndicalists, Lawther was intent on ensuring that he could never be mistaken for a MWM 'reformist', effectively precluding most possibilities of working constructively within the DMA alongside them, including officials of his own lodge. Harvey, on the other hand, did try to make links with the MWM and spoke at one of its mass meetings in April 1912.[132] At his libel trial in November 1912, Harvey tried to align himself with the MWM, arguing that he had printed nothing worse than what the MWM had said of Wilson (with the MWM claiming in March 1912 that DMA leaders were actually *helping* 'the coal kings', Harvey had a point).[133] Whether Harvey's lack of prominence in the MWM was his choice or that of the movement's leadership remains unclear. Certainly, when he went to Follonsby in 1913 Harvey moved from a centrally placed lodge (both geographically and organisationally speaking) to a new lodge with no established role in the DMA's politics. Nevertheless, it was perhaps indicative that both Lawther and Harvey did not maintain their ILP membership when they became syndicalists. By contrast, of the South Wales syndicalists, A.J. Cook, Mainwaring and others all remained in the ILP for some of the period before 1914.[134] This was emblematic of the relative isolation the main Durham syndicalists experienced from the mass rank-and-file movement, which lessened their potential impact; a physical and theoretical separation that was to some extent self-imposed.

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[131] See Lawther's antagonistic opening remarks to the Chopwell 'Industrial Unionist conference', with an audience full of MWM activists. *Blaydon Courier*, 19 October 1912. See also *The Herald of Revolt*, February 1913.

[132] *Durham Chronicle*, 12 April 1912.

[133] *Durham Chronicle*, 1 March 1912; *Evening Chronicle*, 7 November 1912.

[134] Davies, 'Syndicalism and Industrial Unionism', 64; Davies, *Cook*, 10–11.

There remains considerable scope for further detailed regional-industrial studies in building a more accurate and nuanced picture of the extent of syndicalism's reach in pre-Great War Britain. In assessing syndicalist influence we must certainly pay attention to levels of general discontent and industrial militancy, as well as to overt support for specific (apparently syndicalist) innovations such as union amalgamations, industrial unionism, industrial militancy, various forms of industrial action other than striking and so forth. But it is crucial to identify exactly *who* was articulating –and benefiting from– these apparent syndicalist ideas. Fundamental in the Durham coalfield's experience was the ability of the ILP to tap very successfully into the same latent discontent that syndicalists attempted to harness, deploying considerable 'syndicalist' rhetoric and arguing for some 'syndicalist' innovations, all-the-while differentiating themselves from syndicalists and revolutionary politics. Ultimately, ILP activists in the Durham coalfield saw to it that the latent potential for further syndicalist influence was channelled towards their rather different political objectives. Much of the Durham syndicalists' praxis effectively helped their political rivals, the ILP; had it been more akin to that of their South Wales counterparts, Durham syndicalists' influence might have been much greater.

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